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# let's talk about CONSENT

baby

The Down There Health Collective is ever-evolving, occasionally defunct, and working on examining issues of health, sexuality, and gender. We strive to support one another's learning, and bring up body and mental health issues that too often go unaddressed. Down There is based in DC (though our members regularly move far away), distributes zines for free, and is excited to hear about similar work other folks are doing.

Questions? Contact [honor@riseup.net](mailto:honor@riseup.net) or [farah@riseup.net](mailto:farah@riseup.net)

the use of non-  
physical force  
to scare people  
against their  
will, or  
against their  
will, but it is  
not sexual

in a person  
uses another's  
boundary: for instance, doing  
something that someone has said  
no to, or trying to do something

is conventional; to mean permission, but  
conception can be misleading.  
here, it is used to describe the  
process by which people learn to  
understand each other's desires and  
comfort levels so they can interact  
respectfully and considerately. a  
situation must be free of all forms  
of coercion for one person to receive  
genuine consent from another; likewise,  
if one person asks for something  
and the other says they are not  
consensual, it is not consent.

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Questions to think about

from see no speak no hear no

Have you ever talked about consent with your partners or friends?

Do you know people or have you been with people who define consent differently than you do?

Have you ever been unsure about whether or not the person you were being sexual with wanted to be doing what you were doing? Did you talk about it? Did you ignore it in hopes that it would change? Did you continue what you were doing because it was pleasurable to you and you didn't want to deal with what the other person was experiencing? Did you continue because you didn't want to second guess the other person? How do you feel about the choices you made?

that saying "No" was chosen by the largest percentage of both females (48%) and males (44%) as the most important method for communicating nonconsent to intercourse. It is interesting to note that a nonverbal behavior was perceived as being the most important method for a woman to communicate consent for intercourse, while a verbal behavior was perceived as the most important method for a woman to communicate nonconsent...

...Hall found that participants gave permission for some sexual behaviors, but not for every behavior in a positive sexual interaction. Permission giving was most associated with initial sexual behaviors, oral sex, and intercourse. Hall also found that most permission giving for sexual behaviors other than intercourse (e.g., kissing, touching) was nonverbal. About 80% of male and female participants reported giving permission for penile/vaginal intercourse by either verbal or nonverbal means. Participants who gave permission for intercourse indicated giving verbal permission about half of the time and nonverbal about half the time. From this data, it is apparent that roughly 50% of the time males and females are indicating by some nonverbal behavior (e.g., smile, get closer, etc.) that they want to engage in penile/vaginal intercourse. Since nonverbal behavior may be more easily misinterpreted than verbal behavior, a belief in this type of consent may lead to unwanted sexual activity...

...Findings of this study are important for college sex education and date rape prevention programs. Students should learn that both men and women appear to perceive women communicating consent for intercourse nonverbally (e.g., giving intimate kisses) and nonconsent for intercourse verbally (e.g., "I don't want to have sex"). If nonverbal responses are typically interpreted as indicating consent, then it is critical that nonconsent be communicated verbally and quickly so that misunderstandings do not occur...

Jason J. Burrow, Roseann Hannon, and David Hall

University of the Pacific

Burrow Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality, Vol. 1, Sept. 15,  
1998

[www.ejhs.org](http://www.ejhs.org)

## College Students' Perceptions of Women's Verbal and Nonverbal Consent for Sexual Intercourse

Most available research on consent given by women for sexual intercourse has examined coercive/aggressive situations such as rape. These studies have focused on nonconsent (which usually has to be established for a judgment that a rape occurred) rather than on consent. How consent is given in a typical dating situation has been studied very little.

According to [one study], there are two ways in which consent and nonconsent can be defined: (a) nonconsent is assumed unless explicit consent is given, and (b) consent is assumed unless explicit nonconsent is given.

The Antioch College Sexual Offense Policy adopted in 1990 assumes the first definition of nonconsent. This policy states that consent for sexual behavior must be (a) verbal, (b) mutual, and (c) reiterated for every new level of sexual behavior. In other words, nonconsent is assumed unless explicit verbal consent is given. Interestingly, this policy is not based on research. Therefore, the intentions of the policy may be good, but the practical application may be difficult if the policy requires behavior which differs greatly from the way consent is usually given. If this policy accurately describes typical consent patterns, then men and women give explicit verbal consent for every sexual behavior. Research on consent, however, demonstrates that couples do not typically follow the pattern required by the Antioch policy.

[One study] states that consent can be thought of as a mental and/or verbal act. If consent is a mental act (an internal decision) then a partner may try to infer consent from the other person's nonverbal behavior. This can easily lead to miscommunication. Consent can also be a verbal act (explicit statement) which is less likely to lead to miscommunication. Research suggests that most sexual consent is not given in a clear manner. The purpose of the present study was to identify what types of behavior heterosexual men and women believe women would in fact use to show clear consent and nonconsent for sexual intercourse.

...Byers found that both male and female participants indicated that fondling the male's genitals, a nonverbal response, was chosen by the largest percentage of participants for communicating that a woman consents to intercourse. The next largest percentage chose clear verbal consent. Byers also noted

Do you think it is the other person's responsibility to say something if he or she isn't into what you're doing?

Are you clear about your intentions?

Have you ever tried to talk someone into doing something about which he or she showed hesitancy?

How might someone express that what is happening is not okay?

Do you only respond to verbal signs, or are you sensitive to other signs?

Have you ever asked someone what kinds of signs you should look for if he or she has a hard time verbalizing when something feels wrong?

Do you think consent can be erotic?

Do you check in as things progress, or do you assume the original consent means everything is okay?

Do you think about people's abuse histories?

Do you ever get yourself into situations that give you an excuse for touching people you think would say no if you asked? Examples might include dancing, getting drunk around them, falling asleep next to them.

Do you think it is possible to misinterpret silence for consent?

Do you make people feel they are not "fun" or "liberated" if they don't want to try certain sexual things?

Have you ever used jealousy as a means of control?

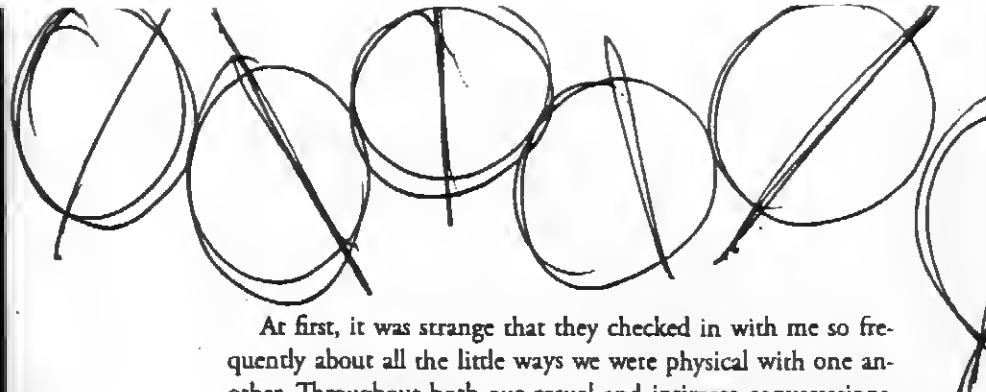
Do you think it's okay to initiate something sexual with someone who is asleep?

How do you react if someone becomes uncomfortable with what you're doing, or if he or she doesn't want to do something? Do you get defensive? Do you feel guilty? Does the other person end up having to take care of you and reassure you, or are you able to step back and listen, to hear and support the other person and take responsibility for your actions?

In telling your side of the story, do you attempt to change the way the other person views a situation?

Do you ever talk about sex and consent and abuse when you are not in bed?

Do you ever try to make bargains? (i.e., "If you let me \_\_\_\_ I'll \_\_\_\_ for you.")



At first, it was strange that they checked in with me so frequently about all the little ways we were physical with one another. Throughout both our casual and intimate conversations, they would ask for my permission before rubbing my shoulders, holding my hand, or resting their head on my lap. Other times, they would touch me lightly, then ask, "Is this okay?" before proceeding. I began to think that they had a difficulty being physically close and consequently were especially conscientious about others' personal space, but they always seemed comfortable with the closeness I initiated—even when I forgot to ask for explicit permission before touching them. They also didn't seem offended or surprised that it was not easy for me to reciprocate the verbal consent they offered me. I tried to be conscious of how we were interacting and to vocalize my desires before moving into their space or touching them, but I've always had a hard time being verbal. As I had only heard the word consent used in reference to sexual relationships, I began to ponder their intentions. I kept thinking to myself, "Does my new friend have a crush on me? Do they want something more intimate than friendship?"

However, as I got used to my friend's style of establishing consent, I recognized that it was part of their personality and indicative of the way they tried to interact with everyone. As I realized this, my feelings about their questions changed. I stopped trying to read into their questions to see if they indicated unspoken interests, and started to appreciate that they were asking how I felt. I felt so respected. It made me feel how deeply my friend cared about me that they wanted to know how I felt about everything, and it made me feel comfortable with them very quickly.

Feedback and discussion are welcome: [redefiningconsent@yahoo.com](mailto:redefiningconsent@yahoo.com)

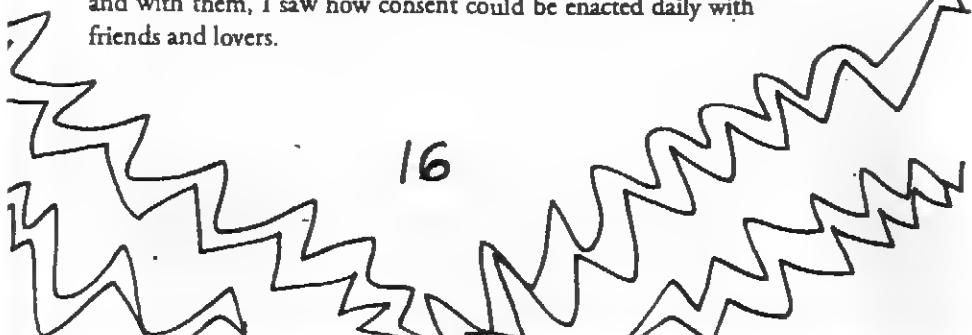


non-consensual interactions of all kinds. In developing our communication skills about our abuse and abuser histories, our sexual histories, our desires, we can create the spaces to begin to talk about the grey areas of consent. We need to foster a culture that takes into account the fact that, despite how desperately we want to be good for the people we love, we sometimes make mistakes, fail to be truthful, and cross boundaries. We need to support both survivors and perpetrators: not to condone non-consensual actions, but because we all need to rid ourselves of the ill effects of living in a hierarchical, capitalist society, and to do so, we must work together.

To broach these questions is not to deny that there is such a thing as sexual assault, nor to defend it as acceptable behavior. On the contrary, it is to demand that we acknowledge that we live in a rape culture: a culture in which sexual assault is pervasive, as are the forces and dynamics that promote it. Sexual assault is a part of all of us who have grown up in this society; we cannot ignore it, or pretend that because we ourselves have been assaulted or because we work to live anarchy in all aspects of our lives that we are not capable of sexual assault. The only way to rid our lives of sexual assault is to open the issue up. This means we must make it safe enough to come out as an assaulter, so that each of us is able to address, openly, honestly, and without fear, everything from the most minor acts of inconsideration to the most serious boundary violations. We are all survivors; we are all perpetrators.

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Before my summer travels, although I had spent a lot of time thinking about and working on making my relationships reflect my anarchist ideals, I had only recently learned the uses of the subcultural catchphrase "consent." While becoming acquainted with this new term, I met a fabulous new friend. When we first met, we spent only a few intense days together, but the time I shared with this new friend made that word, consent, more meaningful to me than any workshop or article ever could. They consider consent a fundamental part of all of their relationships, and with them, I saw how consent could be enacted daily with friends and lovers.



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## Sexual Offense Prevention Policy

Consent is defined as the act of willingly and verbally agreeing to engage in specific sexual conduct. The following are clarifying points:

- Consent is required each and every time there is sexual activity.
- All parties must have a clear and accurate understanding of the sexual activity.
- The person(s) who initiate(s) the sexual activity is responsible for asking for consent.
- The person(s) who are asked are responsible for verbally responding.
- Each new level of sexual activity requires consent.
- Use of agreed upon forms of communication such as gestures or safe words is acceptable, but must be discussed and verbally agreed to by all parties before sexual activity occurs.
- Consent is required regardless of the parties' relationship, prior sexual history, or current activity (e.g. grinding on the dance floor is not consent for further sexual activity).
- At any and all times when consent is withdrawn or not verbally agreed to, the sexual activity must stop immediately.
- Silence is not consent.
- Body movements and non-verbal responses such as moans are not consent.
- A person can not give consent while sleeping.
- All parties must have unimpaired judgment (examples that may cause impairment include but are not limited to alcohol, drugs, mental health conditions, physical health conditions).
- All parties must use safer sex practices.
- All parties must disclose personal risk factors and any known STIs. Individuals are responsible for maintaining awareness of their sexual health.

These requirements for consent do not restrict with whom the sexual activity may occur, the type of sexual activity that occurs, the props/toys/tools that are used, the number of persons involved, the gender(s) or gender expressions of persons involved.

to see the complete policy:  
<http://www.antioch-college.edu/Campus/sopp/>

# — The Spirit of the Policy is YES —

The Spirit of Antioch's Sexual Offense Prevention Policy is about "Yes!": people having the opportunity in intimacy to face one another in deeper and truer, more honest, more fully satisfying ways; actually being bodily present with ourselves and each other; the Cosmic YES of wholly present living. This 'spirit' of CONSENT -- the awareness raising/hair raising aspect of the policy -- catalyzes people to become aware of what they really want sexually, find ways to make a partner aware of that, and to be aware of what their partner is actually okay with sexually. Conscious and confident intimacy.

This spirit is about a fully affirmative YES. Not an ambiguous yes, or a well-not-really-but-ok-I-guess yes. Certainly not a silent-no "yes," or a ouch- or yuck-but-I'm-afraid-to-hurt-your-feelings yes. This is about YES, UM HUM, ABSOLUTELY, YIPPEE YAHOO YES! Being with someone who you are sure REALLY WANTS to be with you. Being with someone who you are sure YOU REALLY WANT to be with. THAT is EXCITING, is EROTIC, is DEEP, is GREAT, is YES! That is consent. That is the Spirit of the policy.

The Spirit of the policy is also about No, hearing that a person is really NOT OK being with you in this way or that way, and being able to tell a person that you are NOT OK doing this or that. It is also about the EXPECTATION that they will RESPECT your choices, your requests, and your answers to their requests WITHOUT deriding you, manipulating you, or threatening you in any way. This spirit is about respecting that each person, for WHATEVER REASONS they choose, has a right to define why and how they will be touched, at any time or step along the way, no matter what you intend or want to share with them. (and vice versa.)

And because we come from a culture that so often disrespects personal choices sexually -- through confusing dynamics, gender role socializations, sexual manipulation, abuse and violence -- part of the spirit of the policy is corrective. It helps us all learn to SPELL OUT THE NOS so that each of us may feel freer and safer being assertive about and affirmed for SPELLING OUT THE YESES.

Antioch's SOP policy is SOCIAL REVOLUTION -- of course, why else would it ignite such a mixture of joy, empowerment, confusion and backlash?! -- and it is exhilarating to be part of a community that is working so hard to increase equality and mutual satisfaction, and to rectify domination and oppression.

by Christina Cappelletti, Education Coordinator/Advocate  
Sexual Offense Prevention and Survivors' Advocacy Program  
Antioch College, Yellow Springs OH

If we could develop a way of addressing these situations that focused on promoting communication and understanding rather than establishing who is in the wrong, it might make it easier for those who commit boundary violations to hear and learn from criticism and less stressful for those whose boundaries are crossed to address these instances. Whenever a person feels that his or her desires have not been respected, regardless of whether or not a court of law would find there to be sufficient evidence to substantiate charges of sexual assault, all those involved in the situation need to hold themselves accountable for the ways they have not communicated with or respected each other and work out how to make sure it never happens again.

We also need a language that can account for situations in which it is not clear who is the perpetrator and who is the survivor. Identifying one person as a perpetrator may not make sense if both or all of the people involved in the interaction both crossed another person's boundaries and had their own boundaries crossed. The language we currently have available to describe these situations creates

a false division of the world between perpetrators and survivors, when—just as with oppressors and those who are oppressed—most people experience both sides of the dichotomy at one time or another. Such a binary sets up one class of people as entirely in the right and one as entirely in the wrong, as if one always bears all accountability and the other has no responsibility or no way to make their relationships more consensual. In extreme cases, this is indeed the case, but we also need to be able to address all the other cases, in which both parties could stand to improve their communication skills and sensitivity.

We need a new way to conceptualize and communicate about our interactions, one that takes into account all of our different boundaries—sexual, romantic, and platonic—and the ways they can be crossed. Practicing consent and respecting others' boundaries is important both in sexual relationships and in every other aspect of our lives: in organizing together, in living collectively, in planning direct actions securely. Non-hierarchical, consensual relationships are the substance of anarchy, and we need to prioritize seeking and promoting consent in all our interactions.

As every experience is unique, we should use language specific to each one, rather than attempting to force all our experiences into abstract categories; we can do so by describing each individually: as a deliberate boundary violation, for example, or as a decision in which consent was ambiguous. We can do much to break down the stigma and shame surrounding the issue of sexual assault by opening up dialogues about

One of the most problematic consequences of our lack of appropriate language is that people are often reluctant to address more subtle or complicated experiences of boundary violations at all. The perpetrator/survivor language is so serious that in less dramatic cases—for example, in situations that are not violent or physically forceful—the survivor may even wonder if what he or she is feeling legitimately constitutes a serious problem worth exploring and addressing. If a person chooses not to use the language of sexual assault to describe a violation of his or her boundaries, does that mean it is not important? Many people are understandably hesitant to accuse loved ones of sexual assault or label them perpetrators because of the stigma attached to these terms and the drama that often ensues when they are used. This should not mean that non-consensual interactions go unaddressed.

It also seems to be the case that, as much as the perpetrator/survivor language is useful when dialogue is impossible, it can also halt dialogue where it might otherwise be possible. This language creates categorizations of people rather than descriptions of their behavior, reducing an individual to an action. As such, it tends to put people on the defensive, which often makes it harder for them to receive criticism<sup>3</sup>. The definitive implications and accusatory tone of this language can precipitate a situation in which, instead of focusing on reconciling differing experiences of reality, people on opposing sides struggle to prove that their interpretation of reality is the “true” one. Once this dynamic is in effect, the discussion is no longer about people working through their problems and trying to understand and respect each other’s unique experiences, but an investigation about “objective” reality in which all parties stand trial. No one should ever be forced to defend what he or she feels, least of all someone who has survived a violation of his or her boundaries. Regardless of “what really happened,” a person’s experience is his or hers alone and deserves to be validated as such. To decide which reality is “the truth,” we must give value to one person and not the other: this is validation on the scarcity model. When conflicts arise surrounding a question of sexual assault, communities are often forced to take sides, making the matter into a popularity contest; likewise, individuals can feel required to support one person at the other’s expense.

<sup>3</sup> It is important for both the perpetrator and the survivor to deal with their actions and experiences in supportive environments. If the survivor is unable or unwilling to work with the perpetrator, some manifestation of community still should. Sexual assault and other forms of unhealthy relationship dynamics are community issues, and must be dealt with accordingly. Hopefully, all the individuals involved can receive support from a variety of sources.

### Communicating About Sex

We all face certain issues in a sexual situation, whether it’s with a date, a longtime lover, or a spouse: How do I feel at the moment? Do I want to be sexually close with this person now? In what ways? What if I don’t know—can I say I’m confused? Can I communicate clearly what I want and what I don’t want?

Talking about sex can be challenging. We may prefer “proper” terms such as vagina, penis, fellatio, and intercourse or slang terms such as cunt, cock, and fucking. If we find slang terms degrading, we may need to be creative and come up with our own sexy and affirming language. Sometimes the vagueness of expressions like “hooking up” and “making love” can lead to miscommunication if both partners are not clear on the meaning. Finding a common language can help communication.

We may want to find a time to talk with our partners when we are not having sex and there’s no pressure to respond right away. Talking about safer sex, birth control, sexual techniques, or specific preferences can temporarily “kill the mood” but can ultimately lead to heightened intimacy. We can practice saying what feels good while exchanging massages, for example, when the atmosphere is less intense.

Our body language and the sounds we make are just as important as the words we use. Making the sounds that let a partner know we are feeling good, speeding up or slowing down our hip movements, placing a firm hand on the shoulder meaning “Let’s go slow” are all ways of communicating.

*I’ve liked just saying “Watch” and showing.*

*We were both really excited. My lover began rubbing my clitoris hard, and it hurt. It took me a second to figure out what to do. I was afraid that if I said something about it, I would spoil the excitement for both of us. Then I realized I could just take my lover’s hand and very gently move it up a little higher to my pubic hair.*

We also need to be aware of the relationship between our words and our body language. We may be verbally saying yes to same sexual activity, but our body is pulling away or tensing up. Or we may be saying no to further sexual intimacy while continuing to stimulate

ourselves or our partners. We can seek to make our words and movements consistent.

Communication about our sexual needs is a continuous process. A woman who had found the courage to talk with her lover about their sexual relationship said in angry frustration, "I told him what I like once, so why doesn't he know now? Did he forget? Doesn't he care?"

*He would come closest instantly when we began to make love after marvelous kissing. A little while later, we'd make love again, when I'd be more aroused--aching for him, in fact. I never knew how to alter this pattern, never dared talk about it, and later found out that he had resented "hoving" to make love twice.*

*We had a wildly passionate sex life for a year and a half. When we moved in together, sexuality suddenly became an issue. It turned out our patterns were very different. My lover needs to talk, to feel intimate in conversation, to relax completely before she can feel sexual. I need to touch and to make a physical connection first before I feel relaxed enough to talk intimately. I'd reach out for her as we went into the bedroom, and she'd freeze. We bottled it out for months, both feeling terrible, before we figured out what was going on.*

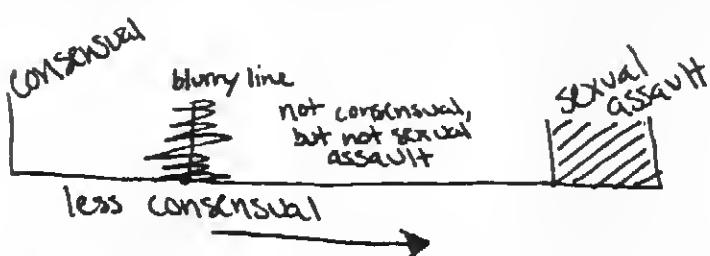
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experience can be a powerful thing. This language is also useful for dealing with those who are unwilling to be held accountable for their actions, who refuse to talk about and work through their issues. Being labeled a perpetrator of sexual assault carries a heavy weight; naming an act sexual assault means that the

matter will be taken seriously and, hopefully, addressed by all who hear about it. In this way, the labeling of the perpetrator can pick where self-initiated dialogue leaves off.

However, beyond these specific situations, the perpetrator/survivor language has many limitations. There is a wide spectrum of interactions that are unhealthy and non-consensual, but the term sexual assault describes only a narrow range of that spectrum<sup>2</sup>. Imagine if we could plot our interactions on a line from the most consensual to the least. The ones that are completely consensual, in which no boundaries are crossed, would occupy a small space on one side, while those interactions labeled sexual assault would occupy a small space on the other; somewhere in the middle, between these extremes, there would still be a whole range of interactions in which boundaries are crossed to varying extents. As it stands, the language used specifically to describe sexual assault is not sufficient for describing those interactions that fall somewhere in the middle.

The language of perpetrator and survivor can also promote a false sense that sexual assault is the only form of boundary violation worth addressing. Describing sexual assault and the survivors and perpetrators that experience sexual assault as distinct from other, presumably "normal," experiences of sexuality misrepresents any experience not labeled sexual assault as free of coercion. On the contrary, in our authoritarian society, domination infects everything, resulting in even our most intimate and cherished relationships being tainted with subtle—or sometimes not so subtle—unequal power dynamics. A division between "sexual assault" and "everything else" lets everyone off the hook who has not been labeled a sexual assaulter; it thus focuses attention away from the ways we all can stand to improve our relationships and our sensitivity to one another.



<sup>2</sup>...although it's important to point out that these are interactions which many of us are unfortunate enough to experience, and which often carry an impact on our lives disproportionate to the frequency with which we experience them.

media representations of these relationships, we unconsciously mimic those dynamics in our personal lives, developing "skills" for acquiring power and protecting ourselves in our own relationships. As radicals, we understand that the connections we have with one another are fundamental to the revolutionary potential of our actions.

Consequently, we work to build self-reliant communities and develop emotionally sustaining relationships, by nurturing our ability to act and communicate honestly and unlearning our destructive behaviors. This is difficult, and we often revert to old habits and make mistakes. As individuals and as communities, we must create supportive, forgiving environments in which we can embrace our own shortcomings and errors and those of others in the spirit of a genuine desire to continue reconstructing ourselves. We need to equip ourselves and our communities with the tools to deal with the personal conflicts and complicated situations that inevitably arise as an integral part of the process of developing radical relationships.

To this end, we need a more extensive and sophisticated language with which to address violations of personal boundaries and work out how these can be discouraged. The discussion about how to cope with sexual assault within radical communities is constantly evolving, and fortunately, at least in some circles, it is finally beginning to be carried on in the open. Much can be taken from this discussion and applied to the ways other types of conflicts are addressed; but at the same time, there is much that needs to be reworked. We would do well to reconsider the current language available for addressing these issues: what the terms mean, what purposes they serve effectively, what their shortcomings are.

In our relationships, we often set boundaries and sometimes even ask each other for consent. In most relationships, these boundaries are unspoken, assumed: *I will not sit on my friend's partner's lap. I will only hug this friend for hello and goodbye.* In romantic relationships, we tend to define these boundaries more explicitly with our partners: *I will not have unprotected sex. It is not okay for my partner to kiss me in front of my parents.* In relationships of all kinds, from platonic to sexual, we can cross others' boundaries and hurt them or make them uncomfortable. This happens frequently, especially in relationships in which boundaries are only implicit.

Sexual assault is an intense manifestation of this violation of boundaries. When a sexual assault occurs, the one who crosses the boundary is labeled the perpetrator and the one whose boundary has been crossed is called the survivor, a more empowering term for victim. This is forceful terminology, and it can be really useful for assisting the survivor in naming and processing an experience. Simply having language with which to break the silence imposed by

Even in the most loving relationships, asking for what we want may be hard.

- We feel that sex is supposed to come naturally, and having to talk about it must mean there's a problem.
- We are afraid that being honest about what we want will threaten the other person.
- We are embarrassed by the words themselves.
- We have been making love with the same person for years, and it feels risky to bring up new insights.
- We aren't communicating well with our partner in other areas of our relationship.
- Our partner seems defensive and might interpret our suggestion as a criticism or a demand.
- We don't know exactly what we want at a particular time, or we prefer to react to something our partner does.
- Even with a willing partner, we may feel inhibited about asserting our sexuality openly and proudly.

If we do ask for what we want, we may be relieved and gratified to get our desires met. However, if our partner has different preferences, we

may have to do some negotiating or look below the surface and figure out the underlying needs. For example, let's say that you want to spend long hours in bed on a Sunday morning making love, but your partner wants to get up and go for a run. What are your needs that aren't being met? Do you want more intimacy? Do you need time to unwind? Do you want more sexual attention? What are your partner's needs? Instead of getting locked into positions over whether to cuddle in bed on Sundays, you and your partner can focus on how to get your needs fulfilled in other ways. Perhaps you can create special times throughout the week for relaxing together. Expanding the focus to include your underlying needs can open up a lot of possibilities.

From <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/book/excerpt.asp?id=19>

# — WE are all survivors — — we are all perpetrators —

Last summer was full of adventures: cooking in outdoor kitchens, building tripods, planning actions, sleeping in treehouses in the middle of NYC. I traveled up the east coast, coming to a new city every week. In the process, I fell for my traveling partner's partner. As a local organizer who had participated in several collective projects that involved facilitated meetings and complex protocol, I'd thought I already knew all there was to know about process; but now, deeply immersed in the beginning of my first polyamory love triangle, I discovered it could extend to a whole new level. There were long conversations to work out simple questions like who would sleep with whom each night, and ongoing efforts to keep each other aware of all our feelings about every issue. It was often an arduous process, but consequently, I developed a very open and expressive relationship with my new partner, and that felt healthy and good.

At the beginning of a tumultuous time for my new triangle, the three of us and the others with whom we were traveling biked to a party in the city we were temporarily calling home. By the end of the night, I couldn't balance well enough to get back on my too-tall bike. I was drunk. Too drunk. Throughout the night, like many others at the party, I flirted with and kissed lots of people. My new partner was watching me, a little put off by my behavior.

At first, I had been hesitant and cautious about how our new relationship would affect my relations with my traveling partner; but earlier that day, I had decided that if we were going to try this relationship, I should open up and be really vulnerable with my new romantic partner. I had decided that I was ready to sleep with him and had been excitedly awaiting the appropriate time to share this decision with him. Towards the end of the night at the party I kept approaching my partner and asking him to sleep with me when we got back to the house that night. I was excited to tell him that I was ready to do something that he had been wanting. I think he just kept telling me that I was being a drunk, but as a drunk, I kept insisting that I was sober enough to know what I wanted and that I wanted to fuck him. I was being persistent. I felt like he wasn't being clear with me, but I think I was just too drunk to understand no.

The next day, I wasn't thinking about that interaction; I didn't really remember it. I had come home and crashed out alone on my friend's empty bed, and we all spent the morning getting ready for a busy day ahead. But that afternoon, his other partner, my traveling partner, accused me of sexually assaulting him the night before. She told me

I wouldn't stop asking him to sleep with me even though he kept saying no, that I kept hitting on him, and that I made him feel unsafe. Perhaps her account of the situation was colored by the jealousies and insecurities that would later play out between us, but because I

couldn't even remember the night before, I was in no position to dispute it<sup>1</sup>. I spent the day terrified of myself, asking, "Could I be a sexual assaulter? I'm a survivor of sexual assault. How could I assault someone?" and, more importantly, agonizing: "I really care about this person. I would never want to make him feel threatened."

Finally, after a very scary day inside my head, I got to talk with him. He told me about what had happened the night before and said he did not consider it sexual assault. He said he had been annoyed with me, but that was the extent of it, and everything was okay between us. But everything was not okay. Even if what happened wasn't sexual assault, I had clearly made poor choices and disregarded how he felt, mistakes I consider inexcusable. Perhaps I didn't make him feel unsafe, but I am 5'2" and he is 6'2" and much stronger than me. What if he had been drunkenly, persistently hitting on me all night, despite my discouragement? Would I have felt unsafe? Should my disrespectful behavior be tolerated any more because I am small and arguably less intimidating?

Defining sexual assault is difficult. As in all aspects of relationships, there are few absolutes. Every relationship can only be defined and mediated by the people that comprise it; what is comfortable and safe for people in one relationship may not work for people in another. Accordingly, it is up to the survivor alone to name an experience as being sexual assault or not. However, some actions are unacceptable, regardless of whether they are labeled sexual assault. As we struggle to develop relationships free of hierarchy and power, we must also develop a language with which to discuss all of the spaces—complicated and unclear as they may be—in which we act without respect for others.

Most of us grew up fully immersed in this profit-driven culture, in which most public relationships—whether economic, political, or personal—follow a model of dominance and submission in which one party leads and the other follows. Inundated with

respect, the most problematic aspect of this interaction was that she my partner's experience for him. Regardless of a person's motivations, it appropriate to call someone out as a sexual assaulter without the explicit of the other person involved.